

BOOK REVIEWS

Master Fida Hussain: Parsi Theatre mein Pachās Varsh: Pratibha Agrawal (ed.); Natya Shodh Sansthan, Calcutta, 1987; 78 + viii pages, 8 plates; Rs 40.

PARSI THEATRE is well known to theatre lovers in our country, particularly in north India. Started in and around Bombay by Parsi businessmen in Gujarat in the 50s of the last century, the Parsi theatrical companies later swamped the Hindi-speaking region with their productions in Urdu and Hindi. Their plays were based on Indian mythological/historical legends and episodes or on medieval romances, our own or other. But they were inspired by productions of Shakespeare and other European playwrights by visiting British companies for the entertainment of English civil servants, businessmen and the army.

Bereft of Shakespeare's poetry and insight into human nature, Parsi plays were full of unbridled melodrama and supernatural situations. They were staged in a manner that at once dazed and bewitched the audiences with their spectacle, breathtaking stage effects and emotionally surcharged acting. Their impact was so strong and overwhelming that the development of an indigenous theatre in the Hindi region was arrested and distorted. So much so that even the brilliant beginnings in almost all aspects of theatre by a

towering personality like Bharatendu Harishchandra could not be sustained after his untimely death at 35 in 1885.

In fact, for almost a century, the performances of the travelling Parsi companies were the only source of theatrical experience for Hindi-speaking towns. No account of modern Hindi theatre can therefore be complete without a discussion of Parsi theatre. In many ways the work of the Parsi companies has determined the contours and form of modern Hindi theatre and conditioned the theatre consciousness of Hindi audiences immutably. This is all the more so because the Hindi film is a direct descendant of Parsi theatre, sharing and perpetuating many of its good, bad and indifferent features.

It is a curious contradiction of the cultural consciousness of the Hindi-speaking region that Parsi theatre, despite its popularity, has always been regarded as alien, partly because it originated far away and partly because it failed to reflect the cultural sensibilities of Hindi-speaking peoples. As a result authentic material on Parsi theatre in Hindi was almost non-existent till the 50s of the present century.

One of the earliest first-hand autobiographical accounts was *Merā Nātak Kāl* published in 1957 by Radhey Shyam Kathavachak, one of the three important playwrights dominating Parsi theatre. On another playwright of the trio, Narayan Prasad Betab, his daughter Vidyavati Namra published a doctoral thesis in 1972. Mention may also be made of a book by Abdul Kuddus Nairang on the third member of the triumvirate, Agha Hashra Kashmiri, published in 1978. There are also a few other doctoral dissertations but no books by those involved in Parsi theatre. Unlike Bengali or Marathi, there are no autobiographies in Hindi or Urdu by the actors of the Parsi stage. This is a serious lacuna since Parsi theatre, like other contemporary West-inspired theatres in different parts of the country, was essentially an actor's theatre. It was the actor who, in spite of superficial and often poorly constructed plays, held the audience spellbound by his inventiveness and histrionic skills.

In these circumstances the publication of *Parsi Theatre mein Pachās Varsh* (Fifty Years in Parsi Theatre), a kind of autobiographical narrative by one of the most outstanding and popular actors of the Parsi stage, Master Fida Hussain, fills a real gap. It comprises a long, rambling interview of the actor

by Pratibha Agrawal together with her own linking comments, some interesting photographs of Master Fida Hussain in various roles, a brief backgrounder, and an appendix containing very brief biographical notes on stage personalities referred to by Master Fida Hussain in the course of his interview. Altogether, the book is a useful contribution to the very scanty material on Parsi theatre.

The interview reveals Master Fida Hussain as an interesting, multifaceted personality—colourful and adventurous but also austere and disciplinarian, restless and defiant but warm and human, conscientiously devoted to his work over five decades but ready to call it a day when it was time. Born in an orthodox middle-class Muslim family in Moradabad in 1899, Fida Hussain had to leave home to sing and act in the theatre. He recounts his painful early struggle and resounding later successes with a simplicity and charming naivety which would endear him to anyone.

Master Fida Hussain's major work was with two well-known theatre companies, the legendary New Alfred and the Calcutta-based Moonlight, but he was also involved in the formation or running of a number of minor, shortlived companies like the Shahjahan Theatrical Company and Mohan Theatrical Company.

The reminiscences of the actor give an idea of the working of the two major companies, their selection of plays and performers, their tight rehearsal schedules, and the code of conduct and personal discipline they strictly enforced. This is interesting and informative material yielding some new or little-known facts, but it is the account of the minor companies that provides a more vivid and fascinating glimpse of the struggles and hazards theatre people had to face in an earlier era—constant threats from unscrupulous competitors, endemic jealousies among performers and so on. Particularly revealing is the role of financiers and patrons—not only rich businessmen but also degenerate aristocrats who sought pleasures other than theatrical from the stage.

As we know, music was one of the important ingredients of a Parsi dramatic performance and Master Fida Hussain, who was an accomplished musician himself, sets out in some detail how the tunes were chosen or composed, songs written to them and sung. He also tells us of some unknown or less emphasized aspects of music in Parsi theatre. Most of the tunes in Parsi plays, he says, were a kind of rehash or clever transposition of popular film songs. Occasionally the songs also drew upon folk tunes of different

regions, but more frequently they came via films. This only means that by the time the talkies came to India, the original vitality and freshness of Parsi theatre—or for that matter similar melodramatic/heroic theatres in different parts of the country—had been lost; dissipation and repetitiveness had set in.

Master Fida Hussain also mentions that though Parsi drama imitated more or less the Shakespearean model and its performance styles, the preponderance of music in it was a carry-over from our own traditional theatres which are mainly musical. This is a valuable observation because it confirms that initially new dramatic writing and performances in our country, after our contact with Western theatre, had some elements of our traditional modes. But this early and very marginal interaction between the Western modes and our theatre gradually became more and more superficial and later disappeared altogether when realistic Western models in theatre began to be adopted.

There is no doubt that Master Fida Hussain is now one of the very few living stalwarts of Parsi theatre, with an insider's knowledge of at least the final phase of the Parsi stage from the 20s to the 50s and even later. Like other theatre people of his time, he has not had the advantage of

a formal education and cannot put down himself all that he knows or has experienced. But it should be possible to persuade him to delve deeper into his memory for a little more detailed information on some of the least known but crucially important aspects of Parsi theatre.

For instance, it would be useful and instructive to know how rehearsals were conducted; how the play grew from initial reading to performance onstage; how the actors prepared their various roles; how they interacted with the director or instructor; whether the actor himself worked out his movements and gestures and patterns of speech or if he was guided by someone else; how co-ordination between different actors was achieved; what was the role of improvisation, if any; and so on. At another level, questions about finalizing the script on selection—the process of changes or editing before the play went onstage—could also be answered. Often the same story was chosen for production by several Parsi companies. Was there any difference in treat-

ment? If so, what and how? Questions like these can be framed on other aspects of production as well.

By himself Master Fida Hussain would not talk about these things. But if with some patience and persuasion he could be prompted to dig into his vast storehouse of information, it would make a very significant addition to our understanding of a crucial phase of our theatre.

On this score, the present publication somewhat disappoints. By and large the questions do not go beyond generalities and what emerges from the long interview-cum-commentary is little more than information on the general working conditions in Parsi theatre, some amusing anecdotes, as also some unique and distinct traits of Master Fida Hussain as a man. It is difficult to avoid the feeling that a more searching probe would have made this publication an extremely valuable and unique document on the history of Indian, especially Hindi, theatre.

NEMI CHANDRA JAIN

Balagandharva: Vyakti ani Kala: Vasant Shantaram Desai; Venus Prakashan, Pune, 1987 (second edition); 334 pages, 18 plates; Rs 75 (deluxe edition Rs 175).

THIS is a comprehensive Marathi biography of Balagandharva by Vasant Shantaram

Desai who has earlier given us a panoramic view of Marathi theatre in *Makhamalicha Para-*

da (Velvet Curtain). Mr Desai writes with facility and wit, marshalling facts from a lifetime's association with the Marathi stage.

In a career spanning half a century Balagandharva (1888–1967) came to epitomize Marathi theatre and the *nātyasangeet* tradition. Born Narayan Shripad Rajhans in Pune on 26 December 1888 he joined the Kirloskar Natak Mandali in his teens, playing Shakuntala on his first stage appearance in 1906 to instant acclaim. He continued to play female roles till his retirement from the stage in 1955 at the end of a phenomenally successful career. The stage name Balagandharva came from a compliment he received from Bal Gangadhar Tilak who heard him singing as a boy of ten.

Mr Desai has divided his book in three sections. The first section (1888–1927) deals with Balagandharva's rise to fame on the stage, the second with Balagandharva the man and artist, the third with his career and personal life from 1928 to 1967.

In the opening chapters of the first section Mr Desai provides a synoptic history of the origin and development of Marathi theatre and Balagandharva's initiation in drama. Appropriate quotations from plays illustrate this part of the story. The period from 1913—when Balagandharva founded

the Gandharva Natak Mandali, becoming its sole owner in 1919—to 1955 when he made his last stage appearance is covered with meticulous care and detail. Mr Desai writes of the affectionate relations between Balagandharva and his staff, his opulent life-style and unfailing generosity, the discipline he imposed during performances, and his constant care for their sustained excellence. The second section of the book is its *piece de resistance*, exceedingly moving in its account of Balagandharva's personal life.

In the latter half of Balagandharva's eventful life recounted in the third section of this biography we find Balagandharva in the company of an actress known as Gohar Karnataki. When the two met in 1938 Gohar was playing modest roles in the talkies which then posed a threat to professional theatre. It was a lean time for all *mandalis*, including that of Balagandharva, and he inducted Gohar in his company with the hope of retrieving his fortunes. But Gohar had no gift but a sweet voice and utterly failed as a stage actress. Their companionship grew, however, and culminated in marriage in 1951. Mr Desai has traced this relationship with finesse.

From 1952 Balagandharva suffered from what his doctors diagnosed as acute compound degeneration. The condition

deteriorated, affecting both his legs, so that he had to retire from the stage in 1955. But his admirers continued to assemble in large numbers to hear him sing *bhajans* and stage songs. Mr Desai has chosen a very apt heading for his chapter on the death of Balagandharva—at Pune on 15 July 1967—'Rajhansa Maza Nijala'; this is a

line from a famous poem by Ram Ganesh Gadkari, a noted Marathi poet and dramatist.

This is indeed a felt and honest biography of a great Indian artist. The pictures of Balagandharva onstage and off-stage add to the value of the book.

K. D. DIXIT

Creations: Mrinalini Sarabhai; Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd, Ahmedabad, 1986; 98 pages, 80 photographs; Rs 225 (hardbound).

THE FIRST THING that catches the eye is the beautiful design and sleek production of the book. The photographs (both colour and black-and-white), the printing, the layout, everything bears a professional touch. One is therefore tempted to leaf through the entire book before settling down to read it page by page.

Mrinalini Sarabhai is one of the most experienced dancers of today. Her talent in dance has two facets: the interpretative and the creative. As an interpretative dancer she presents Indian classical dances, especially Bharatanatyam, with traditional authenticity. The interpretative dancing, of course, is not devoid of creativity, but is different from creative dance which, though it may borrow the traditional vocabulary, is a new creation so far as structur-

ing and presentation are concerned. *Creations* affords a glimpse of the creative aspect of this talented dancer.

Basically Mrinalini is a poet. She is also an intellectual. In the introductory chapter 'On Dance' she very aptly says: "The intellect contemplates, the body expresses." Naturally she as a creative choreographer considers a composed dance number a contemplative visual poem. Again, contemplation at its deeper level is metaphysical. That is why perhaps a very soft metaphysical ground bass can be heard by the discerning in all the creations of Mrinalini Sarabhai.

Nowadays the technical aspect of dance is given so much importance at the expense of aesthetic considerations that poetry is receding from the field of dance, giving place to virtuos-

ity. This is truly against tradition since poetry in the Indian conception manifests itself at three levels: at the verbal (*vachika*) level where literary poems belong; aural (*śrāvya*), i.e. music; and visual (*dṛśya*), the poetry of dance. Therefore Mrinalini's conception of a dance composition as a visual poem is quite as traditional as it is modern.

Abhinavagupta of the 10th century, one of the all-time great aesthetes, very imaginatively likened a talent (*pratibhā*) to spring which brings out new leaves and flowers on a tree. The tree is obviously tradition. Going by this illustration Mrinalini is undoubtedly a *pratibhā*. For over three decades now she has given countless solo recitals all over the world and has choreographed and produced as many as 49 group-dance compositions. The book presents the germinal ideas of 13 of these compositions.

What the dance compositions aim at has been obliquely stated by the author in the concluding paragraph of the introductory chapter on dance. I am tempted to quote it here:

Let the dance continue as man's search for his identity, man's response to the forces around him, man's search for his integration with the conflicting patterns of existence. Let dance speak in the language of old, but let dancers speak in a contemporary language, with complete artistic integrity, wisdom and

dedication. The movement of the world is still that of Shiva, and the longing for the self is always the message of the dance.

Of the 13 compositions the book deals with I have seen only a few; *Ganga* is my favourite. In this dance-drama, myth effortlessly blends with contemporary reality and time appears cyclic rather than linear. Watching it I felt as though *Ganga* were simultaneously a river, a goddess, my country, my mother.

From the germinal idea to the presentation of a dance composition onstage is a long process involving a series of transformations. Contemplated by a sensitive mind the central idea transforms into a poem, written or unwritten. The poem then takes shape mentally in a series of dynamic images which are translated as dance movements by the choreographer. Next comes the phase of weaving the dance movements together so that they create a visual poem in space. This is a long and exciting process, and nothing would be more interesting for a dance lover than to see it verbally well mapped. That is what I expected from the book but the author only partially satisfies my enquiry. She gives either the germinal idea or the next phase, the poem, as in the case of *Ganga*. The poet and scholar in her would have done the

choreographer justice by allowing more detailed descriptions of each of the 13 creations.

The photographs are beautiful. They wonderfully decorate the book. Some without legends serve as symbols. But a few more *with* legends—explanatory notes—would have enhanced the appeal of the text. For instance the black-and-white photograph spread on pages 56 and 57, accompanying the text on *The Songs of Creation*, serves more as decoration than symbol. An appropriate legend (as on pages 36 & 37) would have helped the reader understand better the highly abstract idea of the dance composition.

The other thing one misses in the book are factual details of each production—date and place of first stage presentation, cast and credits, etc. These details are essential because the productions are not trifles but significant events in the history of contemporary group-dance composition in India. We hope the data will be appended in a future edition.

If one wants to know Mrinalini Sarabhai as a dance scholar one must read her introductory chapter on dance. Here she says:

Today, students are beginning to enquire into the meaning of each stance

and we who teach must be willing to explain. The questioning should be constantly encouraged, for only then is progress based on understanding and knowledge, and not on mere imitation.

Everyone in the field of dance, whether a dancer or dance teacher or student or connoisseur, will see the wisdom of these words.

In the field of dance the importance of the student is paramount as it is the student who will grow into a professional dancer and teacher. The qualitative difference between a student today and earlier, say, a century ago, is that the latter never used to "enquire into the meaning of each stance". He or she was content imitating the teacher's stance hundred per cent. The student today asks why. Here the theoretical and aesthetic aspects of dance come in. Teachers who have no idea of theory thwart the student's enquiry by overemphasizing the practical (*prayogātmaka*) aspect of dance. As a result the student graduating into a dancer is often no more than a live puppet. Mrinalini Sarabhai is against this kind of human puppetry which passes off today as classical dance. For that alone I would salute her.

JIWAN PANI